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# Numerological Tradition in the Works of Jupiter Hammon

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## Introduction

Jupiter Hammon, notable as the first African American poet ever published, has also had the unhappy distinction of being almost universally misunderstood. Critical prejudices and predilections, anachronistic comparisons with later writers, and a myopic view of what it meant to be a slave in colonial America have perpetuated a view of Hammon as clearly untalented, overly conservative, and uncritically acquiescent to white society's religion and mores.<sup>1</sup>

Recent studies have begun to argue that there is more to Hammon's craft than the Bible-thumping, Uncle Tom conservatism implied by many critics—indeed, that Hammon's conservatism is, at best, a veneer used to protect himself from reprisal or punishment by the pro-slavery establishment. As a slave speaking out against slavery, he developed a style of writing with multiple layers of meaning. The discursive meaning is plain: invariably biblical, preaching obedience and peace, it was sure to be approved by even the most censorious reader. But his works also possess encoded subtexts. Had Hammon's earlier critics spotted them, he would have, at the very least, received gentler treatment at their hands; had his colonial, pro-slavery audience spotted them, it is unlikely we would even know of his poems today.

This essay introduces and explains the use of numerological and arithmological subtexts in Hammon's poems.<sup>2</sup> In a society where to be a slave was, usually, to have no known parents and no personal property, to be bought and sold at another's whim, to know that you (or your recent ancestors) had another home, lost forever—in such circumstances, Hammon was searching for an identity, for stability. His knowledge and use of numerological symbols appear as one facet of what was likely a lifetime of collecting and sorting the various ideas he encountered, then remolding them to fashion an identity for himself. Western number symbolism had a long orthodox tradition, and had informed Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance literature, before Hammon eventually made it his own, endowing his poems with an added, nonverbal level of meaning.<sup>3</sup> His ideas about the use of numbers as a poetic structural element most likely came through *Paradise Lost*, Abbé Noel Antoine Pluche's *History of the Heavens* (1741), and Bishop William Beveridge's *Private Thoughts on Religion* (1709), all titles owned by his master, Henry Lloyd.<sup>4</sup> But evidence suggests that he also borrowed books, and could have learned from these as well.<sup>5</sup>

That Hammon employs numerical structures and subtexts

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demands that we approach his poetry in a new way. His technique illuminates his theories of the art of poetical composition and offers a fascinating glimpse of a vestige of the Classical and Medieval eras surviving in colonial America. Hammon employs such conscious, skillful artistry in his poems that it is now difficult to assess them, as Vernon Loggins did in 1931, as "the product of the uncultivated Negro imagination and temperament" (15).

### "Untrained Fancy": The Hostile Critics<sup>6</sup>

Until 1970, when Stanley Ransom reprinted all of them, Hammon's works existed only in scattered pamphlets and broadsides. Despite the previous critical disparagement of Hammon, Ransom was motivated to collect all of his works in a single volume: first, "because he was from our Huntington area," and second, "to place him in his eighteenth-century context to better appreciate his writings."<sup>7</sup> Certainly these motivations have not been shared by the majority of critics before or since Ransom's publication; for them Hammon's status as the first black poet in America seems to be the only reason to pay him any attention at all. Oscar Wegelin, who in the early twentieth century rekindled an awareness of Hammon's writings, wrote, "let the broken lines which fell from his pen be cherished, if for no other reason than that they were written by the first American Negro who attempted to give expression to his thoughts in verse" (Ransom 31). J. Saunders Redding almost grudgingly acknowledges Hammon's race and publishing primacy in *To Make a Poet Black*, where he lambastes Hammon's poetry as "rhymed prose, doggerel . . . expressed in limping phrases" (4). Anthologizers, too, while honoring his unique place in literary history, make it clear that Hammon is "more a colonial curiosity than an authentic monument

of Afro-American literature" (Long and Collier 19). "Only in 'An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley,' " the editors lament, "is there possibility of a quickened interest in Hammon's work. Expectation, however, is dashed in the wake of the poem's metred moralizing" (19). Another anthology judges his poetry as "esthetically anemic and almost stifling in its repetitive religiosity" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 46).

Loggins stands apart from the detractors, attempting to redeem Hammon from the perceived faults of his style. Yet his praises share the same cornerstones as the hostile critics' disparagements: assumptions about Hammon's lack of education and about the purpose of his art. One paragraph from Loggins is sufficient to summarize these unfounded assumptions and generalizations:

There is a strength of wild and native religious feeling in what he wrote, a strength which he achieved without conscious effort. From hearing evangelical sermons and from reading the Bible according to his own untrained fancy, he picked up strange notions regarding salvation, penitential cries, redeeming love, tribunal day, the Holy Word, bounteous mercies. His mystic Negro mind played with these notions; and, endowed with the instinct for music which is so strong in his race, he sang out his impressions in such meters as he had become familiar with in the hymns of Charles Wesley and Augustus Montague Toplady, and in such rimes as for the moment pleased his ear. Indeed, his method of composition must have been that of the unknown makers of the spirituals. (11)

Such an impressionistic sketch omits reference not only to the documented facts of Hammon's life but to the intellectual climate of the century he lived in. Nehemiah Bull, a Harvard graduate and likely Hammon's teacher at the school in Queens Village (Vertanes 4), would certainly take umbrage to hear Redding speak of Hammon's "untutored art" (4), and Loggins of his "untrained fancy."<sup>8</sup> What is more, the poet owned his own Bible and certainly had access to his master's library, judging from refer-

ences in his prose works to books owned by Lloyd. So Hammon appears to have had not only a formal education, but also his master's encouragement to continue his studies independently.

Furthermore, Loggins's notion of Hammon's poetry coming into existence "without conscious effort" tells us that the critic subscribes to one of the compositional ideals of the Romantic era—inspiration. But the phrase does not apply to Hammon. Loggins anachronistically applies the Romantic ideal of inspiration to a poet squarely positioned in the Age of Reason. Redding, too, projects a later age's standard onto the poet by claiming that Hammon "was not without the romantic gift of spontaneity" (8).

The critical anachronism that has surrounded Hammon extends beyond literary considerations and into the historical context of his poetry. Sondra O'Neale has noted this uncritical tendency with respect to the reality of master-slave relations in colonial America, stating that "[m]ost current literary criticism of Jupiter Hammon's work reflects anachronistic thinking" (3). The same conclusion was apparent to Phillip Richards, who observed that "the now accepted picture of Hammon as a black writer who uncritically assimilated the religious views of his master and contentedly accepted the role of pampered slave . . . fails to assess the impact of the Revolutionary period upon Hammon as a preacher and spokesman" (123). Yet, more than a decade after Richards's publication, Faith Berry can still claim in *From Bondage to Liberation* that "He is the first 'contented slave' in Afro-American literature" (50).

The tendency toward anachronism, along with comments like those made by Redding and Loggins, imply dissatisfaction that this father of African American literature bears no similarity to later black authors. No fiery emotion laces the lines of "An Evening Thought," about which poem one critic has complained that "It would be

stretching the point to perceive in this any element distinctly Afro-American" (Long and Collier 8); and another that his "religion was an opiate that dulled him to the world's evil ways. Instead of giving him a revolutionary social vision, it filled him with penitential cries" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 46).

## Encoded Resistance

While open resistance is necessarily absent from his works, subtextual, encoded resistance is not. Since slaves in New York faced "general police state conditions" during Hammon's life (O'Neale 8), it is no surprise that whatever insurrectionist message Hammon's writings contain should be concealed in a subtext rather than explicitly spelled out.<sup>9</sup> This aspect of Hammon's work received comment as early as 1971—ironically, in a book co-edited by Redding, who had blasted Hammon 30 years earlier in *To Make a Poet Black*. Of the "Dialogue Entitled the Kind Master and the Dutiful Servant," the unspecified editor writes, "one suspects that Hammon is double-talking, and doing it so artfully and with such subtly pointed irony as not only to reduce the Master's admonitions to absurdity but to constitute a statement of protest against them" (Davis, Redding, and Joyce 4). O'Neale concurs: "Obviously the critic must break hidden codes and patterns to unlock the shackled writers' intended meaning" (3-4). Elsewhere, O'Neale notes that Hammon encouraged his fellow slaves "to learn to read . . . the Bible for themselves because only then could they understand the coded messages he had written about their enslavement" (Hill, *et al.* 72).

Rosemary Fithian Guruswamy also detects "a deliberate coding technique" in Hammon's "Address to Phillis Wheatley"; she recognizes in this poem a "semantic slide" that creates "a puzzle available for the canny reader to

unravel" (192). Some may scoff at the idea of encryption of any kind in Hammon's ostensibly face-value poems, but Guruswamy defends the notion by referring to William Scheick's consideration of the same technique at work in Phillis Wheatley's poems. She adds, "Scheick . . . notes that no evidence exists that any of Wheatley's contemporaries would detect her encoded protest. However, the fact that Hammon is using the same technique in a poem addressed to her seems to be at least a strong suggestion that some sharing of transgressive undertones was occurring" (197n22). These critics all recognize in Hammon's works not the chaotic effusions of a second-rate, untutored folk poet, but a message of abolitionist subversion, veiled in the language of the Bible. They find Hammon not a "workaday" versifier (Redding 6), but an intellectually astute craftsman, not ruled by emotion, but wise to the loopholes in the restrictions placed on him by his white would-be censors.

So much for "untutored art" and "untrained fancy."

### The Numerological Tradition<sup>10</sup>

While Hammon certainly "prefigur[es] the tradition which he spawned" (O'Neale 1), his work has as much affinity with the seventeenth century as the nineteenth. Number symbolism was "the most forceful orthodox determinant of Renaissance thought" (Heringer xii), and Hammon's poetry is as much a part of this tradition's swan song as it is a germ of later black literary traditions.

The twenty-first century finds somewhat alien the concept of the communicative power of symbolic numbers, but it came quite naturally to earlier centuries.<sup>11</sup> Alastair Fowler cites the period from 1580-1680 as the time during which the use of number as a poetic resource "reached its greatest

height of sophistication" (ix), and it is employed by Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Herbert, Marvell, and Milton, to name only a few major western poets. John Dryden is generally held to be its last major practitioner.<sup>12</sup> Just as Phillis Wheatley took stylistic cues from Alexander Pope, Hammon shared some of his poetic tools in common with these earlier poets, whose works Hammon would either have found in the Lloyd library or perhaps borrowed.<sup>13</sup>

At first it seems odd to set him in line with the likes of Spenser, Donne, and Milton, but the intellectual climate in which Hammon lived had not yet given up the idea of the number as a real symbol of preternatural mysteries. Isaac Newton, who died when Hammon was 15 years old, studied alchemy and numerology along with empirical science. William Beveridge, an Anglican bishop whom Hammon quotes in his prose works, valued the "science of numbers." His treatises on time and mathematics are close contemporaries with the *Arithmologia*, a monumental encyclopedia of number lore produced in Rome in 1665 by Athanasius Kircher, SJ.<sup>14</sup> The scientist, the Anglican, the Jesuit, and the slave poet all held the Bible to be their supreme authority, and saw no incongruity in simultaneously recognizing numbers as potential keys to unlock divine mysteries. The tie between Hammon and these Renaissance poets seems even less strange when we remember that some of his African American contemporaries, including such major figures as John Marrant and Prince Hall, were Freemasons, and held specific beliefs about the power of numbers. Although the arithmetical tradition was on the decline, it was still far from dead in Hammon's lifetime, and his use of number for autobiographical, structural, and symbolic purposes in three of his four extant poems implies that he was aware of the tradition.

The origins of Western number symbolism can be traced back to the



school of Pythagoras, for whom numbers were the only absolutes in a universe subject to constant change.<sup>15</sup> Christians and Jews justified their credence in symbolic numbers by claiming that Pythagoras was a student of Moses, and that the Pentateuch was the original source of the "science" of numbers.<sup>16</sup> It was supposed that Pythagoras had traveled to Egypt, "there to learne of the priestes of that cuntry the vertu of numbers, & the moste exquisite figures of *Geometrie*."<sup>17</sup> In 1797, Prince Hall revised this legend by claiming that Moses had been taught by his father-in-law, Jethro, "an Ethiopiean," saying that "Jethro understood geometry" (72). (Hall's revisionist history would make Hammon, by virtue of his African heritage, a descendant of the fountainhead of all numerical lore.<sup>18</sup>) But for early Christians, Pythagorean philosophy's connection with God's chosen people proved its validity, since it could be seen not as a pagan tradition but as another embodiment of Mosaic wisdom. The Christian endorsement and the link with ancient Ethiopia, doubtless in circulation before its appearance in Hall's 1797 publication, could very well have been factors in predisposing Hammon, as both Christian and African, to accept the "virtue of numbers" as real and valid.

The Christian orthodoxy of number symbolism and numerological exegesis must be stressed.<sup>19</sup> Augustine had provided its lasting *imprimatur* (Hopper 78; Butler 24), warning that "We must not overlook the science of numbers, therefore, which, in many passages of Holy Scripture, is found to be of great value to the diligent student" (*City of God* XI.30). Maren-Sofie Røstvig, a leading scholar of Christian arithmetical structures in literature, underlines the intellectual importance that numbers had for Augustine: "The beauty of verse is corporeal insofar as it depends on words spoken in time, but the abstract art of metrical movement [i.e., the nature of numbers] is constant and changeless. For this rea-

son it is perverse to love that which is perceived by the ear better than what is in the mind—the art of poetry itself" (10).

The Church Fathers cited many biblical passages in support of God's close relationship to numbers, as did their medieval successors. Wisdom 11:20 was one of the most important.<sup>20</sup> God has "ordered all things in measure and number and weight." It was widely quoted from Augustine through the seventeenth century, and the belief in the absolute truth of numbers, as given by God to humankind in the structure of the universe, "was a basic premise, stated or unstated, in most Western philosophy, religion, and science until the seventeenth century" (Heninger xiii).<sup>21</sup> God used numbers in creating an orderly, empirically knowable universe, "and it is this order we admire in a work of art. By contemplating this order, therefore, the mind is led back to God" (Røstvig 3). To structure poetry through numerical patterns was to participate in the divine act of creation, and was thus a major motivation for poets. Hammon included, to incorporate number symbolism into their works.<sup>22</sup>

A second passage offered in support of the importance of numbers was Romans 1:20. A corollary to Wisdom 11:20, it teaches that invisible things are understood by things created. Or, to say it another way, if numbers are the essential constituents of the created order, to study that order is to understand the invisible mysteries of God. We are to study created things, such as poetry, to understand divine things: we are to move "from the temporal to the eternal" (Røstvig 11).

### Biographical Importance of the Number 23 in "An Evening Thought"

**T**he number 23 is ubiquitous in Hammon's poetry, serving a symbolic function in each poem in

which he uses it. "An Evening Thought" offers a logical starting point, both since it is his first poem and since its 23 repetitions of the word "salvation" are impossible to overlook. Wegelin reports the exact count twice in his short commentary on the poem, and Loggins also marvels at its frequency. However, no comments are offered to explain the repeated use of this particular word, other than Wegelin's speculation that it was "one of his favorites" (Ransom 30) and that "Hammon was evidently much interested in Salvation" (24).

Arguably, Hammon's "interest in Salvation" and his fondness for the number 23 are related, and linked to the purchase of his own Bible in May 1733. If so, the number would hold autobiographical significance for him. We know he was born on 17 October 1711, which would have made him 21 years and six months old at the time of the purchase. However, it is possible that Hammon, like most slaves, was unaware of his exact date of birth. If he did think himself 23 years old in May 1733, then he would have associated that number with the year of his life that he took possession of the Word of God. The repetition of the word "salvation" 23 times in "An Evening Thought" could be his way of commemorating the momentous Bible purchase, the year of his conversion.

There is good reason to regard the event as a conversion, even though Hammon was undoubtedly a Christian. According to O'Neale, "In the spring of 1730, when he was about nineteen years old, Jupiter became gravely ill with a goutlike disease. Three years later, he purchased a Bible from his owner Henry Lloyd. The bout of sickness along with the purchase of the Bible were typical indications of a

dramatic religious conversion in the eighteenth century" (Hill, *et al.* 70). In addition to commemorating the year of Hammon's "conversion," the number 23 had been used by previous poets (for example, Donne) as a symbol of religious conversion, through the number's association with the winter solstice.<sup>23</sup>

**To structure poetry through numerical patterns was to participate in the divine act of creation, and thus early poets, Hammon included, were highly motivated to incorporate number symbolism into their works.**

To risk an astronomical oversimplification: the earth's axis tilts approximately 23.5 degrees from its orbital plane, and this tilt causes the sun to appear

low in the sky during winter and high during summer. The apparent path of the sun resulting from this tilt is called the ecliptic, observed by Heraclitus as simultaneously unexpected (assuming a geometrically perfect cosmos) and steadfast: "Sun will not overstep his measures, otherwise the Erinyes, ministers of Justice, will find him out" (Kirk and Raven 203). At winter solstice the sun reaches its lowest declination on the ecliptic—minus 23.5 degrees—at which time it literally "converts," or turns back in the Zodiac at Capricorn and begins its apparent "ascent" northward in the sky, which culminates at summer solstice. This phenomenon led poets to emphasize the number 23 in connection with conversion experiences, and since Christ had long been identified with the *Sol oriens* of ancient pagan sun-religions (Fowler 36), 23 could also be used to symbolize Christ himself.<sup>24</sup>

Another autobiographical connection between Hammon and 23 is strongly suggested by the possibility of his familiarity with Abbé Pluche's *History of the Heavens*, one of the books available to him in the Lloyd library. According to Pluche, the figure responsible for the "origine of the Symbolical Writing" of the Egyptians is "Cham or Hammon being commonly called *God*

Jehov, Jehov-Ammon" (100). "They sometimes joined to [this name] the name of father . . . and called him Diospiter or Jovpiter." Over time, Ammon "by a stupid kind of love was confounded with God, and with Osiris or the star moderator of seasons, [and] became the famous Jov-Ammon or the Jupiter-Ammon" (101).<sup>25</sup> Pluche explains that, whatever name you give Ammon, he is really "no more than the emblem of the course of the sun" (115).

These examples suggest that solar imagery was significant to Hammon in many ways: representing his Bible purchase or "conversion" to Christianity, symbolic of Christ himself, and as a symbol connecting Hammon with his African heritage. It is in all probability he adopted his surname after buying his Bible, reading Pluche's account of Jupiter-Hammon and putting two and two together (or in Hammon's case, two and three).

Considering Hammon's steady veneration of Christ, the "light of the world"; his status as a preacher, bringing the Gospel to his fellow slaves; the identification of his Egyptian namesake with "the course of the sun"; his probable age at the time of his Bible purchase: taking all of these details into account, it appears Hammon does have a purpose in embedding the number 23 into his works.<sup>26</sup> His purpose is manifold: (1) to magnify Christ through a more perfect medium than words permit, since numbers are "constant and changeless"; (2) to identify himself as under the banner of Christ, as a "bringer of light"; (3) to connect his identity with his African forbears—pagan though they were—through use of a symbol connected with the god Jupiter-Ammon; and (4) to commemorate the year of his conversion and Bible purchase, the most important event of his life.<sup>27</sup>

In short, Jupiter Hammon was intelligently participating in an intelligent tradition. As I mentioned above, the appeal of a numerological subtext was intellectual in nature, not emotional, which is certainly a reason for

Hammon's rough treatment at the hands of critics from the Romantic school, as well as of those who mistakenly view him as an unintelligent slave who, as such, ought to have been driven by emotion.<sup>28</sup>

## Other Christian Contexts For 23

Hammon further uses the number 23 in ways remarkably similar to those used by Dante and Milton, who seem to have been following both Biblical exegesis of the number and a specific cosmological model.

Hammon's familiarity with Dante is unknown, but *Paradise Lost* is a likely source. The Lloyds owned a copy.<sup>29</sup>

Biblical contexts led 23 to be interpreted as "the number of justice and vengeance" (Qvarnström 106). This interpretation derived in part from 1 Corinthians 10:8, "Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand." The punishment Paul refers to in this verse is found in Numbers 25:9. So says Pietro Bongo, who devoted to the number 23 a section of his *Numerorum mysteria* (1583), a "scholarly study . . . firmly based on Augustine's Biblical exegesis" and "a summary of Patristic and Renaissance exegesis of Biblical numbers" (Qvarnström 104). Bongo also refers to Exodus 32:28, which relates the punishment of Israel for the earlier idolatry of the golden calf, saying that the Levites, at the command of Moses, killed 23,000 men in one day.<sup>30</sup> It is significant, though, that in both instances God's wrath was channeled through the Levites, who numbered 23,000 at the second census of the Israelites (Numbers 26:62). This fact will assume some importance in my reading of Hammon's "Dialogue."

In addition to the association of 23 with justice and vengeance, Bongo draws another, signifying the "salvation of mankind." A clear explanation



of Bongo's rationale, which adds a New Testament notion of grace to an Old Testament theme of punishment, is related by Qvarnström:

"Through the same number [23] may be signified the consummation of the salvation of mankind," [Bongo asserts,] and salvation can be achieved by means of true faith and good deeds. While the number three (seen as a part of twenty-three) from the point of view of Justice refers to sin and to Satan, from the point of view of Grace it contains, "in a mystical manner," the divine Trinity and thus it represents true faith ("fides integra"). The perfect deeds are made possible by a complete obedience to the decalogue, and these are contained twice in the number twenty. This is so since the ten commandments have been passed on to us, in part through the Old Testament and in part through the New. . . . And by adding three to twenty we get twenty-three. (106-07)

Interpretation of numbers by breaking them down into smaller parts was not new to the sixteenth century; Augustine used it in *De Doctrina Christiana* to explain the number 10 (as part of his explanation of the number 40).<sup>31</sup> Thus, Bongo's method follows an ancient, highly orthodox tradition.

Qvarnström has shown that Milton was drawing on these two interpretations of the number in *Paradise Lost*, by giving Christ four 23-line speeches: "two . . . are concerned with Justice and punishment, two with Grace and atonement" (Qvarnström 107), and the first of them is spoken on the twenty-third day of the narrative action, further emphasizing the number (101). Additionally, Eve is given one 23-line speech, in which "the ideas of punishment and atonement *combine*, since from Eve will come the descendant who will combine the functions of avenger and atoner" (107). These are the only speeches of this length in the epic (101), strongly suggesting that Milton considered 23 to symbolize justice and mercy, and that he limited the speeches to 23 lines in order to wed theme with form.<sup>32</sup>

If Hammon had taken notice of this parallelism in his own reading of

Milton, he would have also noticed the allusion to it in Beveridge's *Private Thoughts Upon Religion*, also in the Lloyd library. In the Second Article, Beveridge gives a long prose list of Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Christ. Of the numerous Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ, Beveridge selects 23, introducing each one with a formula juxtaposing the Law and the Gospel. For example, "The Law says, that he was to be brought out of Egypt. . . . The Gospel, that *Jesus was called thence*" (41).<sup>33</sup> He concludes with, "Thus the Gospel seems to me to be a perfect transcript of the Law, and the Histories of *Jesus* nothing else but the Prophecies of Christ turned into an History" (47). Beveridge seems to be working under the same assumption as Milton in contrasting the Law (justice) and the Gospel (mercy). Bongo's assertion that 23 represented justice and mercy—justice and vengeance derived from the Old Testament (the Law), and mercy and grace from the New (the Gospel).

In addition to interpreting 23 as the number of Justice and Mercy, Milton alludes to Dante's use of the number by arranging Christ's four 23-line speeches in *Paradise Lost* equally on either side of the Enthronement episode, "calling to mind the joint ascensions of Christ and the Virgin in Canto 23 of the *Paradiso*" (Frost, "John Donne" 140).<sup>34</sup> In the *Paradiso*, Kate Gartner Frost explains, "immediately after two sets of 23-line speeches, Satan is driven to hell, pursued by Christ the bringer of Divine Justice who then returns to Paradise rising through the twenty-three levels of the created universe—the same twenty-three levels he was again to traverse from his Harrowing of Hell" (Frost, "John Donne" 140).

Dante's allusion to the levels of the universe points to a third context for 23, namely its cosmological interpretation. The Pythagoreans, and later, medievals, thought of the universe as "a proportion."<sup>35</sup> This proportional nature was graphically depicted in a

number of ways, one of which posited that the created universe consisted of 23 levels (Frost, "Magnus Pan" 238), which, as we have just seen, is a feature of both Dante's and Milton's epics. The medieval (and Renaissance) proclivity for numerical classification of virtually everything in the universe seems to stem from Wisdom 11:20: if God ordered all things in measure, number, and weight, it is logical that we should strive to understand the specifics of that ordering. Through the cosmological interpretation, 23 is seen to represent the universe generally, exclusive of Heaven itself.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, a fourth interpretation of 23 signifies devotion to God. It stems from Numbers 26:62 (KJV), which states that at the second census of the Israelites, the number of male Levites a month old or more numbered 23,000. The verse deserves a full quotation: "And those that were numbered of them were twenty and three thousand, all males from a month old and upward: for they were not numbered among the children of Israel, because there was no inheritance given them among the children of Israel."

### Application to Hammon's Poems

Hammon's own use of the number 23 calls to mind its earlier exegetical and poetic manifestations. In "An Evening Thought," he uses the word *salvation* 23 times. Bongo's words will be remembered here, that 23 signifies "consummation of the salvation of mankind"; also, for some, 23 symbolizes conversion and the Christ, through its association with the "rising sun" of the winter solstice and with the 23.5 degree path of the ecliptic. Virtually every stanza quite explicitly deals with salvation and its concomitants (grace, mercy, repentance, and so on). Form and theme are in perfect agreement, validating the numerological interpretation. The direct correspondence of 23 as a symbol of salvation with the word

*salvation* itself may seem somewhat heavy-handed; still, it must be remembered both that "Evening Thought" was Hammon's first poem, and that he was at the end of a *dying* tradition, its heyday having been a century before his birth. Both facts may account for why Hammon's use of number symbolism in "Evening Thought" seems less than virtuoso, compared with the sophistication he displays in his later poems, and especially when compared with the arithmetical pyrotechnics of Spenser and Milton.

The "Address to Phillis Wheatley" contains 23 instances of various names of God. One divine name absent from the poem is the African name Jupiter-Ammon, Osiris, "the course of the sun." This absence is not unexpected: Hammon bids Wheatley, "Among the heathen live no more, / Come magnify thy God" (ll. 43-44). Yet the poem's juxtaposition of a devout adherence to the Christian faith with an awareness of the "distant shores" of Africa suggests a conflation, or double application, of the Christian and ancient African significance of 23. Hammon emerges from a tradition thoroughly comfortable with such syncretism. Christopher Butler explains that among Renaissance thinkers, "Reverence for antiquity thus led, paradoxically, to a totally ahistorical conflation of doctrines" (48-49).

The "Dialogue Entitled the Kind Master and the Dutiful Servant," Hammon's "artistic zenith" (O'Neale 191), shows Hammon's most complex use of numerological subtext: the number is used in several of its significations, and the first 23 stanzas are fully understood only when considered with the seven that follow. The first 23 stanzas, alternating between the Master and Servant, seem best interpreted in light of the cosmological implications of the number. These 23 stanzas represent the levels of the created universe; the Master speaks the first and last of these, indicating that in this world, the Master is supreme. He both initiates and terminates discourse. However,

the Servant alone speaks the final seven stanzas, and 23 lines from the end of the poem, we read, "Believe your friend call'd Hammon." The significance of the poet's placing his own name in this position is difficult to overstate. All of the aforementioned biographical significance comes to bear, and calling to mind Numbers 26:62, Hammon identifies himself as one devoted to God, for the Levites—set apart to serve God—numbered 23,000. Since "there was no inheritance given them among the children of Israel," the connection with Hammon is very suggestive. The reader of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* will remember that the slaves indeed were not numbered with the white colonists (Jefferson 86), and a slave's property, whatever it may have amounted to, passed to the Master after the slave's death—not to any children the slave may have had. A third significance attaches to the placement of Hammon's name when it is read as a claim to the promises of salvation, but here it is more emphatic than that found in "Evening Thought" or the "Address." Here Hammon, looking to the end, places his very name on the number symbolizing salvation.

The seven final stanzas support a symbolic reading of the first 23 in two ways. Seven is the number of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as enumerated in Isaiah 11:2-3. The Holy Spirit rests on the speaker of these final seven stanzas, and it seems that the Master has no part in it. Thus, the numerological subtext reveals that it is Hammon who has the Holy Spirit, not his master, since only Hammon speaks the final seven stanzas. Indeed, the poem bears this interpretation even without resort to numerology: the Master's lack of these gifts shows from the very beginning of the poem, when he bids the Servant, "Come my servant, follow me, / According to thy place." Erskine Peters explains, "On a very submerged level his entreaty is a threat. . . . For Hammon, the Master's subtly coercive gesture reveals a lack of attunement

with divine grace and therefore an ineligibility to assume the role of a Christian leader" (5). Combined with the forward-looking placement of Hammon's name at the twenty-third line from the poem's end, this indicates that while the Master's hope begins and ends in the boundaries of the created universe, Hammon, endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, will eventually see heaven.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

When Hammon writes, "I have passed the common bounds set for man, and must soon go the way of all the earth" (Ransom 107), one cannot help but imagine his delight as everything comes together in his head: Pluche's identification of the god Jupiter-Hammon with "the course of the sun," Hammon's self-image as a light of truth to his fellow slaves, his use of encoded meaning, both in numerological structure and semantic savvy, and, perhaps, knowledge of Heraclitus's dictum: "Sun will not overstep his measures, otherwise the Erinyes, ministers of Justice, will find him out." He must have experienced no small degree of satisfaction at realizing that this "sun" *did* overstep his measures—and got away with it.

The number 23 is used symbolically in Hammon's poetry, and in the same way that previous poets used it—as a biblical subtext connoting justice and mercy and as a symbol of God's creation. It also symbolizes several facets of Hammon's bid for the creation of a self-identity: one unique, and possessed by no man but himself.<sup>38</sup> It recalls the year of his life in which "salvation" came to him by the purchase of his own Bible. It identifies him with the god Jupiter-Hammon, which, while pagan in origin, doubly served his imagination: first, it connected him with his African heritage, and second, through its association with the sun

and its 23-degree ecliptic it reminded him of his function as a light to his fellow slaves. As a slave poet, the solar imagery also served to identify him as one who pursues an unexpected, though steady, course, just as the sun seemed to the ancient philosophers to do. And finally, it serves an additional biographical function, symbolizing Hammon's self-identification with the Levites, as devoted to God, and with "no inheritance given [him] among the children of Israel."<sup>39</sup> Røstvig cogently states that "The verbal texture [of poet-

ry] is, in fact, more important than the patterns formed by symbolic numbers" (xii). Nonetheless, I hope that this essay opens a door to a fuller and broader appreciation of Hammon's poetic craftsmanship. As Augustine wrote in *De Doctrina Christiana*, "Those who do not find what they seek directly stated labor in hunger; those who do not seek because they have what they wish at once frequently become indolent in disdain. In either of these situations indifference is an evil" (2.6.8).

1. Additional biographical information can be found in Vertanes (useful, though somewhat dated; gives inaccurate date of birth) and Ransom.
2. As distinguished from "numerology," the term "arithmology" refers to the creation of complex symbols through manipulation of numbers, beyond their static symbolic values.
3. Of the use of numerical structures in poetry, Røstvig writes, "Its nonverbal character invests [the poem] with a higher kind of reality and a higher kind of beauty than words can ever hope to reach" (79).
4. For an inventory of the library, see Cameron.
5. Hammon quotes from Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) in his prose works. Stoddard is not represented in the Lloyd library inventory, suggesting that Hammon (and the Lloyds) borrowed books.
6. See O'Neale, Introduction, for further discussion of Hammon's critics up to 1993.
7. E-mail from Stanley Ransom to the author, 23 May 2005.
8. Wegelin believed that Hammon was uneducated, and that an editor was responsible for the grammatical correctness of his poetry (Ransom 30); and while Hammon refers to himself as an "unlearned Ethiopian" in "An Evening's Improvement" (Ransom 94), the context, "Others may object and say, what can we expect from an unlearned Ethiopian?" suggests that this is a rhetorical move rather than a factual record of Hammon's learning.
9. "The life of a slave in New England in the eighteenth century was just as much an incessant crucible as the life of a slave in the South in the nineteenth century" (Hill, *et al.* 69).
10. For further scholarship on numerology, see Butler, Eckhardt (preface), Fowler, Frost, Heninger, Hopper, Qvarnström, and Røstvig.
11. See Hopper and Schimmel for the pan-cultural and ancient nature of number symbolism.
12. "Number symbolism reaches something of a grand climax in Dryden's poetry . . . but I find little or no evidence of it in Pope or Thomas Gray" (Røstvig xvii).
13. "Phillis Wheatley's poetic master was Alexander Pope" (Davis 10).
14. See Beveridge, *Institutionum*.
15. Traces of Pythagoreanism are apparent even in Beveridge's *Arithmetices*: a multiplication table treating single-digit numbers is labelled "Tabula Pythagorica" (Beveridge, *Institutionum* 233). The Pythagoreans were concerned that nothing could have any kind of true identity in a universe of constant change; Hammon, likewise, was searching for his own true identity in his own unstable world. See Heninger for more on Pythagoreanism as understood in the Renaissance.
16. Many early Church Fathers believed that Plato, too, was familiar with the Mosaic scriptures. In *City of God* VIII.11 Augustine cites passages from the *Timaeus* reminiscent of the creation account in the book of Genesis.
17. See Turler (qtd. in Heninger 27). Likewise concerning other knowledge, "Origen (c. 185-c. 254) . . . argued that all the Greek sages had borrowed their ideas . . . from Solomon (who had acquired this information through the Holy Spirit long before their time), and that they had put them forth as their own inventions" (Minnis 26).
18. Significantly, the origins of Latin Christian literature are also closely related to Africa. "Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220), creator of ecclesiastical Latin, was a native of Africa; Minucius Felix, author of the celebrated dialogue 'Octavius,' Cyprian (c. 200-58), bishop of Carthage, Arnobius and his disciple Lactantius, the 'Cicero Christianus,' were all natives of Africa. . . . Every Christian Latinist writing

## Notes



before the Council of Nicaea (325) was an African. Add to this that the oldest Latin translation of the Bible ('Itala') was probably done in Africa, and that it was first diffused in Italy during the pontificate of Pope Victor I (189-98)—an African—and that the African is probably the oldest of all Latin liturgies, in use long before Rome abandoned Greek" (Morison 232n41).

19. See Butler, Heninger, Hopper, and Røstvig for the history of number symbolism in Christian thought.

20. Wisdom 11:20 in translations made from the original languages; 11:21 in the Vulgate and translations made from the Vulgate, such as the Douay-Rheims Bible of 1609.

21. Cf. the closing lines to Marvell's "On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*": "Thy verse created like thy *Theme* sublime, / In Number, Weight, and Measure, needs not *Rhime*." Also Jonson's "Ode on Cary and Morison": "All offices were done / By him, so ample, full, and round, / In weight, in measure, number, sound" (ll. 48-50).

22. Roche gives additional motivations: "Spenser wants us to concentrate on the inadequacy of human language, which he stamps into rhythms that we feel as true; Shakespeare concentrates on the inappropriateness of his language to point us to unspoken realities . . ." (428). Another biblical text seen as a divine fiat to compose poetry in imitation of the celestial order was 1 Corinthians 15:53: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."

23. See Frost, *Holy Delight*, chapter 5.

24. "The emphasis on conversion in connection with the number 23 is reinforced by the literature of spiritual autobiography. The twenty-third chapter of the *Vita Nuova* and the same chapter of Suso's *Exemplar* both present intense conversion experiences, as does the twenty-third of Petrarch's *Rime*" (Frost, *Holy Delight* 126). Fowler explains that Christ as the *Sol oriens* was based on Luke 1:78-79 (Fowler 36): he was "the dayspring from on high" who "give[s] light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

25. In Pluche, the name is sometimes spelled "Jupiter-Ammon," sometimes "Jupiter-Hammon."

26. The Gospel passages cited here are, in turn, John 8:12; John 9:5; and Matthew 5:14, "Ye are the light of the world."

27. Hammon's poetry has further solar associations: altogether, his poetic corpus consists of 365 lines, the same number of days the sun takes to complete its annual path. One might object that this total is finessed, since it necessitates counting each of the poems' titles as one line, and includes the bracketed "Line on the present war" from the "Dialogue." The line count minus titles and the "Line on the present war" is 360—the same number of "degrees of the sun's annual motion about the ecliptic" (Fowler 136). Either way, Hammon's total poetic output resonates with solar connotations. It is assumed that Hammon wrote poetry now lost, which, if found, would moot this observation. But until it is found, this fact is worth observing.

28. Heninger states that the goal of the Pythagorean school was "progress to beatific vision by the long route through scientific study rather than the shortcut of irrational religious rapture" (22).

29. Although many readers much more learned than Hammon have read and reread *Paradise Lost* without so much as suspecting any arithmetical significance, this calculation by no means compels one to assume that Hammon—certainly more alert to 23s than the average reader—would have missed it, too.

30. *Numerorum mysteria* was popular enough to appear in at least three more editions: Bergamo (1591, 1599) and Paris (1618). Regarding the number of fornicators killed, conversely, "Bongo . . . argues that the 24,000 killed [in Num. 25:9] . . . in reality should be 23,000" (Qvarnström 106). The Lloyds owned a copy of the Geneva Bible, which, in its gloss to 1 Corinthians 10:8, also explains away the discrepancy, saying, "Moses readeth foure and twentie thousand, which declareth an infinite number." It is possible that Hammon was aware both of the discrepancy and of the gloss explaining it, though it is not known which version of the Bible he owned personally. Modern critics are less forgiving than Bongo or the Geneva glossators. As Frost puts it, "Bongo . . . has to fudge the Old Testament text" (Frost, *Holy Delight* 128) to create a parallel between the Old and New Testament verses. Current translations (including the King James Version) of the Bible give the number killed in Exodus 32:28 as 3,000 rather than 23,000, which raises questions of the integrity of the text Bongo used, and which was presumably used by many other readers and exegetes during his era.

31. Augustine writes that "ten signifies a knowledge of the Creator and the creature; for the trinity is the Creator and the septenary indicates the creature by reason of his life and body. For with reference to life there are three, whence we should love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds; and with reference to the body there are very obviously four elements of which it is made" (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.16.25).

32. On a less erudite note, Hammon could have associated the number 23 with Mercy through his knowledge of Psalm 23: in the Geneva Bible, the Argument of the Psalm reads, "Because the Prophet had proved the great mercies of God at divers times, and in sundry manners, hee gathereth a certaine assurance, fully persuading himselfe that God will continue the very same goodnesse



towards him for ever." The Psalm influences Hammon's "Address to Phillis Wheatley," seen in "[t]he shepherd-pastor symbolism of stanza 12 and its subscript" (O'Neale 70).

33. The twenty-first prophecy, which claims that the glory of the second temple would be greater than the first (Haggai 2:9), does not use this parallel phrasing.

34. *Paradise Lost* III. 144-66 (Mercy); VI. 723-45 (Justice); VI. 762 (enthronement); VI. 801-23 (Justice); XI. 22-44 (Mercy).

35. Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 986a4 (qtd. in Heninger 76).

36. Robert Fludd, a 17th-century physician and scholar, offers a hierarchy of the universe constrained to match the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet: 4 elements + 7 planets + the starry heaven (*caelum stellatum*) + 9 ranks of angels + Mind = 22. (Fludd's hierarchy is found in vol. 2 of his *Utriusque cosmi majoris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*; diagram shown in Frost, "Magnus Pan"). Conspicuously absent from this 22-level design is the *primum mobile*, the outermost physical sphere of the cosmos, which is given its proper place between the *caelum stellatum* and the angels in other parts of Fludd's work (where he does not conflate it with other levels to accommodate a numerological pattern). This enumeration of 23 levels seems to be the source of the emphasis given to the number by Dante and Milton in their epics.

37. It is tempting to look at the "Line on the present war" in the context of the total number of lines in the poem—120—also the number of years Moses lived. Given the several instances of veiled anti-slavery protest in Hammon's works, it is plausible that the length of the "Dialogue" is meant to align Hammon with Moses, as the one who will lead his people out of slavery—the "present war" perhaps referring as much to the struggle for abolition, as to the American War of Independence.

38. Pluche notes of the priests of the ancient Egyptian religions, that theirs "was a mysterious theology; which they took great care not to divulge" (vol. 1, p. 261).

39. A final observation: His first poem was published in 1760; his last in 1782, a span of 23 calendar years. Until we have evidence to back it up, such a statistic should be viewed as coincidental; but until we have evidence, who can say that Hammon did not intend to craft his poetic career at such a macro level?

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